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WHAT IS "ENGLISH"?

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If I remember correctly, Jefferson, when accused of a lack of originality in the Declaration of Independence, replied that he did not suppose his document to be intended as an expression of his private and personal emotions; and in the remarks which I am to make here, I do not wish to pretend to any originality of idea or definition. If I seem to some of you merely to repeat what is true, I shall thank you for your concurrence, only adding that, judging from the evidence of textbooks and classroom practice, not all are of your mind. And if to others my conclusions seem wrong, let these conclusions not be attributed to attempted originality, but to an observation and experience which if partial have at least been real.

My real subject is not so much "English" as how we should wish "English" to be taught; and what I have to say that concerns this subject could be said in a few paragraphs, for neither its theory nor its application is intricate. But I cannot begin the discussion until I know that you understand what I mean by "English." The term, like those others of common currency, "radicalism," "conservatism," "liberalism," has so frequently been substituted for thought as to become as slippery as a wet tire. You can rest any argument upon it and slide anywhere.

When I say "English," and mean simply and solely the teaching of English literature, I find perhaps the greatest agreement. The old, bad method, which Professor Lounsbury, of Yale, in the seventies, was the first to attack, of teaching textbooks about literature instead of the literature itself, has largely gone. Much of course remains which those who believe a good book a living organism, not a dead corpus, may properly object to. Nevertheless I hazard without much fear of contradiction the assertion, that the purpose of a good course in English literature is to make the mind of the student supple and dynamic. By a mind supple in literature I mean one that turns easily to meet and follow the thought of the writer; one that in some measure re-creates literary experience as it reads. By a dynamic mind I mean one that moves ahead by its own motion toward literary concepts and ideas; a mind that is capable at will or need of making, if not literature, at least a literary atmosphere. Only such minds as these have been enfranchised in literature.

"English" means something with reasonable definiteness when literature is in question; but what "English" means in the field of composition is always puzzling. Is it a study of good books, which incidentally may serve as models for writing? Is it a potential production of literature? Is it merely adequate expression of anything? Or is it a compulsory drill applied to the word and the sentence? No single answer satisfies. And indeed I think that we must go back to the old categories of stimulus and discipline before we can stabilize the question. The teaching of literature has been perhaps too readily divided into discipline and stimulus—since too much of either is likely to negate the other. But the distinction in composition is valuable. Hold fast to it until this argument clarifies.

The power to compose, by which one does not mean elegant exercises in literary parquetry, nor imaginative creation, but merely the power to express ideas, has often been compared to a tool. If we must have a unit of comparison, a muscle, it seems to me, provides the better figure. A tool is a dead thing that does not change in itself. The power to write English functions like a muscle, which is stiffened by and trained for the task it is set. The stiffening of a muscle is like the discipline of writing, its dri-

in spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and orderly development. The training of a muscle is like that flexible adaptation of the means of writing to its ends which comes only from the need to express, long felt and steadily encountered. And in composition, be it added, this need to express is a by-product of general education. Boys and girls may be *taught* the forms of writing; their composing muscle, so to speak, may be strengthened by discipline; but when it comes to the training of that muscle, then their total experience must contribute; *they* must contribute it; they must *learn* to write.

If I am correct in this analysis, two elements of this term "English" which we bandy so readily, carry serious implications with them. Discipline, whether of literature or composition, we need not stop to be concerned over, for discipline is easy to understand, though hard enough, heaven knows, to apply. But the supple and dynamic mind of which I have spoken, the mind that is not merely stocked with so much reading, that is not merely aware of so much literary information, but, rather, goes on creating for itself a literature of pleasant thinking—such a mind is a different matter. It is not to be formed by any process laid down in a prospectus.

Nor is it any easier to provide in the teaching of English composition that *need* of expression which makes the student seek the knowledge of how to write. Perhaps nine-tenths of the energy that has been spent in the teaching of English in the past has been expended without achieving either of these high and desirable results.

I do not propose to discuss the cause for the failure of so much of our effort to do more than boost the unwilling, reduce the illiterate to relative literacy, and give a book or two to the bookless. I do not believe that it is necessary to discuss it. If we have learned anything in the past five years—and we must have learned something in spite of accumulating evidence to the contrary—it is that, whereas the human brain, under a strong compulsion, will fill to its full capacity with marvelous speed, to increase that capacity, to make the containing vessel elastic where it has been unyielding, to substitute rubber for ivory, and furthermore to give birth to intellectual desire in stolid matter-of-fact minds is so

difficult that nine-tenths of our nine-tenths of partial failure is well accounted for.

Nevertheless, in spite of the very real difficulties that in America confront the teaching of aesthetics and of form, we have often been successful, and it is our successes, not our failures, that are significant. Bury the dead and propagate from the living is the rule here as elsewhere. And our success in teaching literary feeling and the power to express has been the more hopeful because, unless my observation has been faulty, the same principle has been triumphant in both of the main branches of English teaching. And that principle has been a very simple one. Success has been almost uniformly in measure with the degree of intimate, personal, individual contact between the teacher and the taught.

For example, in teaching literature (itself elusive) to that elusive thing called mind, you may assemble your facts and your theories with the greatest care, and still at best have to guess at what kindles the spark, sets up the wireless wave that transfers the educational impulse from teacher to student. You can lecture upon the life of Shakespeare, or the mysticism of Francis Thompson, or the difference between tragedy and comedy, with complete competence, and a reasonable certainty that your points are transferred from your brain to the waiting notebooks. But how much urge toward self-education results is largely guess work.

And likewise, in teaching composition you can plow the mind of youth, harrow it, plant it, and offer the best rules for care of the growing plant, and yet the merit of the crop has very little reference to the scope and thoroughness of your directions. Apparently there is no way of being sure of what, in any given instance, you ought to teach for the best effects. The automatic, teacherless textbook is still uninvented; not, it appears, because the teacher is much more certain than the book to hit the mark with his expositions, but rather because he is more than type speaking, he is a personality, a mind.

There is, indeed, no *certainty* as to the value of facts in education, little *certainty* as to the value of methods. One factor only may be sure in its effect in teaching and that is the teacher. That half-communicable thing, the literary spirit, he can seldom formulate; but he can possess it, and then it becomes communicable. That

creative spirit which stirs the student's brain and makes him seek form for his thoughts and a body of words, the teacher can seldom put in a textbook or the words of a lecture, but he may possess its energy; and then he can impart it. He can impart it sometimes by lecturing, but more generally only in felt individual contact with his students. Hence the importance of meetings, however brief, face to face, in talk, not recitation. Success in teaching hovers close to a conjuncture of personalities; is farthest from long-range education. "English," for the boy who has really been educated, is chiefly his contact with the literary temperament.

The moral of all this of course is that for our teaching of any kind of English we must have full-bodied men and women whose rich experience and mature thought is, not compartmented, but rather easily flowing into their actions, their talk, their opinions, their teaching. This moral I do not need to draw, or at least, draw out. It is being drawn for us on every side by leaders of drives for endowment and educators generally. I pass over its importance and its difficulties to pause upon a further question. Suppose that you have the *sine qua non*—the real teacher—how should he be used in English in the light of what has been said before?

The question is really how—if I may be allowed the expression—to teach by the teacher. We all know that in English literature a good lecturer can often accomplish this wholesale with large groups of students. But except with the very rare best of classroom performances, where the teacher shares the essence of the actor's art, and can suffuse his words with himself, I doubt whether there is any complete substitute for that living together of two minds in talk (even brief talk) which is so different from lecture hearing and so much more fruitful. I do not say that we must provide confessionals where every student must meet his instructor in any intimacy where none other intrudes. All that we seek may be gained in an informal meeting small enough in its numbers so that talk is possible, and each member feels himself present in personality as well as in mind. This is enough for results. And these results are all important. I believe that I can almost infallibly distinguish the boys among my Freshmen who have known intimate contact with literary minds. What I cannot tell in

advance of knowledge is whether they have lived in a family of minds made supple by literary experience, or whether the elasticity of their brains and their perceptiveness came from contacts at school. But there proves invariably to be a personal association somewhere in their experience. They were not converted by a lecture alone, nor made regenerate merely by a series of recitations.

In the teaching of composition this is even more true. Discipline, it appears, like any other drill, can be administered to squads. But stimulus, the fostering and guiding of an idea, the strengthening of the impulse to express until the *need* makes the *means* something more than a rhetorical formula—this is more exigent. This calls for the personal in education. And where there is eager writing, virile writing, writing by students that is not mere copybook exercise, but an organ growing in power, I find, nine times out of ten, some man or woman in the background, who talked not *of* rhetoric so much as *to* this Thomas Brown, not *about* the subject of English composition, but *to*, directly *to*, this composer of English.

In fact, the teaching of composition must be tutorial in character somewhere along the line, and so in a less measure must be the teaching of literature. The ways and means I am not here to discuss in detail. But I do wish to make several remarks upon the problem. The first has direct reference to what the colleges should expect of the schools. In composition we have to discipline too much in college and so can tutor too little. It is harder, I believe, to drill poor soldiers than good recruits. It is, in fact, almost impossible to discipline effectually in spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure in college. It is usually too late. The boys and girls are too old for it. They break sometimes, but do not bend toward a new and more accurate growth. Discipline in English composition, except in the more mature field of the logical development of ideas, belongs to the schools rather than to the colleges. It is their opportunity and, if they miss it, our burden. I do not for an instant mean that inspiration, the teaching of the teacher's impulse to express with eagerness and accuracy and truth, is not their privilege also. But they have two fields where credit may be had for making a generation whose dumb impulses find

words; we, as a rule, only one, and little enough time allotted to that one.

But, in a more general fashion, let me also say that the practical difficulties in the way of personal contact are not perhaps so great as we have estimated. Where there are two hundred students to be met so many hours a week and led by the ears through so many pages of textbook, the folly of doing our work by wholesale instead of by retail is not perhaps evident. It may seem that out of sheer necessity we have neglected the personal equation in the conduct of American teaching. It is possible, however, that we have been sacrificing to a false arithmetic and afraid of an impossibility which is after all not impossible but only difficult. Suppose it should be demonstrable that what the scholar learns for himself under guidance is worth from two to three times the facts and principles he is merely taught. Suppose that five minutes of talk, a conference with a group, not a class, a personal, informal word following the kind of question that comes in conversation but not in the classroom—suppose that any one of these does more to propel the sluggish mind onward to make its own momentum than an hour, or hours, of lecture and recitation, why then we may make a new reckoning of efficiency, a new disposition of time, and perhaps a new object for instruction. I would give to lectures and recitations what they are worth, to the personal conference what it is worth, and then refigure my schedule.

If you, the teachers, are alive intellectually; if your passion for literature, or your zeal for criticism, functions wholesomely as a part of your life, drawing its strength from knowledge and experience, and enriching in return all your contacts with environment, why then your best program for teaching is that which permits you best to give of yourselves. Your minds can touch where the textbook fails. You, in a sense, *are* literature and criticism, and you cannot give facts, cannot give even technique, unless you give yourselves also. Boys and girls trained in a school where these ideals were upheld in practice would be unmistakable. They would bear with them the seeds of education, not mere samples of its fruit. They would, I suspect, come nearer than the present generation to being really educated in "English."